

Clamdigger A Symbol Of Serenity

By Lois Martin

Behind your plate of clams is a VIP, a specialist, the clamdigger. And it worries me as our clam flats have given way to pollution, the red tide or other afflictions, that the unique breed of clamdiggers will dwindle with the supply of clams.

That would be a loss. As fond as I am of clams, I'd miss the digger if he were to become extinct more than I would miss the diggee.

It's true my perspicacity about the trade of clam digging has decreased as I've spent less time near the flats. But I remember them well. Some of the most intriguing people I've known had a tendency to dig clams. Some did it professionally while others did it because it somehow gave them more than a peck or bushel of clams to steam. There must be a personal esteem found on the flats.

These tradesmen have character. A few of them are characters. Last month while on vacation in Brooksville, Maine I'd find myself outside



the cottage early watching the bay and its natural creatures begin the day. It was always a quiet, even-tempered beginning with an occasional loon sounding and several families of ducks having breakfast. That week was also a time of an early morning low tide.

So as I sat on the shore I'd look to my right where the flats are and see the clamdigger at work. He has a uniform of sorts, his boots, his pant legs tucked into them, and a sweatshirt affair open at the neck. I've never seen a barebacked or barelegged digger. He wouldn't be interested in swatting while he was digging.

From the distance I could see the man had kept the same position a long while. Indeed for more than 15 minutes he stayed bent over at work in the flats. And I sincerely believed that if I kept that same position so long without breaking the bent back posture, I'd moan when I stood up straight. And you know I've never known a clamdigger with a bad back. I don't know if that means that digging's good for the back or that only people with good backs dig.

I've been meaning to ask to be sure, but I'd bet the diggers like the early morning work. There's a serenity there, an unimposed upon dedication to the hoe and hod that must be appealing. Come to think of it all clamdiggers I've known were gentle. They weren't the type to run for political office. They were not raucous talking but low-toned conversationalists.

The good ones are fussy about their clams. There's the matter of finding a good place to dig, the squirting spots to stake out, before the creel is set down and the clam fork carefully pulls away the flats to expose the delicious victims of the diggings. Good clamdiggers don't break the shells. And they're determined to get them as free of sand as possible. They slish the basket affair up and down out of the water to insure your fried clams won't be crunchy.

His life is determined by the tides. And he's nearly as reliable as they are. He, too, is steady, predictable, constant in his appearance at the flats.

I don't know many clamdiggers now. I wish I did. I'd be the better for it and it would be a good sign, an insurance, for society's stock of clams and clean flats.

The men I've known who dig clams are unhurried. Though they tend to business on the flats, the meter of their efforts is a calm, sure rhythm. There is no sign of pressure, simply one of purpose.

And being an environmentalist of people, I'd hope the art of clamdigging can be maintained. Preserving the character of the clamdigger is ecologically sound.

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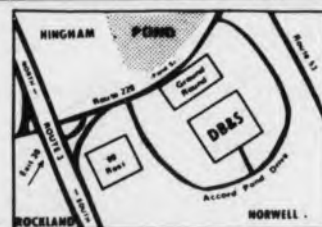
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